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MILTON'S PART IN *THEATRUM POETARUM*

In the closing paragraph of the essay prefixed to *Theatrum Poetarum Anglicanorum* Edward Philips, the nephew of Milton, apologizes for his occasional disagreement with "received opinion," on the ground that such divergence comes about not "out of affectation of singularity, but from a different apprehension, which a strict inquiry into the truth of things . . . hath suggested to my reason." Another explanation, however, has been very generally advanced to account for the compiler's seeming independence of judgment. Philips is said to have incorporated his uncle's opinions not only in the body of his work, where he briefly characterizes the various writers, but also in the critical preface, which contains much that is sound and uplifting. The general belief, since Warton's day, is that the whole tone of the Preface is noticeably higher than the ordinary level of Philips's mental power.¹

It is only natural that certain phrases in the Preface should call to the reader's mind corresponding thoughts in Milton's writings. At the beginning of the essay, Philips, with a marked air of superiority, calls attention to the disparity between men—"how aspiring to the Perfection of knowledge the one, how immers't in swinish sloth and ignorance the other." These words suggest the Attendant Spirit's first speech in *Comus*. Immediately, Philips proceeds to speak of "the vulgar Multitude," those "who live Sardinapalian lives, . . . not caring to understand ought beyond to eat, drink, and play." Had the writer before him these lines from the second epic (*P. R.* 3, 49-51):

What the people but a herd confused,
A miscellaneous rabble, who extol
Things vulgar, and, well weighed, scarce worth the praise?

Again, Philips seems to appreciate, as Milton did, the dignity of authorship. In offering his plea for "the well meaners only" in literature, Philips reminds us that the author of any "Poetical

¹ See T. Warton, *Poems*, ed. 1785, p. 60, and *History of English Poetry*, ed. 1840, III, p. 356; and N. Drake, *Essays . . . illustrative of the Spectator*, 1814, II, p. 135.

Volume, be it never so small," is put to "the double expence of Brain to bring it forth and of purse to publish it to the world," and that "no Man designs to writ ill." This may seem only a faint echo of two fine passages of *Areopagitica*, one beginning, "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit," and the other, "When a man writes to the world, he summons up all his reason and deliberation to assist him." Other such correspondences in thought may easily be found, and the weight that they carry will depend altogether on the reader's habits of mind.

Much more suggestive of the younger writer's dependence on the older are some of the definite critical dicta expounded in the Preface. Philips's veneration for antiquity, at a time when "nothing, it seems, relishes so well as what is written in the smooth style of our present Language," was not uncommon among critics at the Restoration. The same may be said of his respect for modern Italian poetry; of his belief that pastoral poetry "treats oft times of higher matters, thought convenient to be spoken of rather mysteriously and obscurely then in plain tearmes"; and of the idea that the epic handles "a brief, obscure, or remote Tradition, but of some remarkable piece of story, in which the Poet hath an ample feild to enlarge by feigning of probable circumstances." All such dicta, as well as his handy use of metrical terms, Philips, after the manner of Dick Minim, could have acquired from the daily talk of London wits as well as from his uncle. The same, finally, could be said of the more significant declaration that poetry is "a Science certainly of all others the most noble and exalted, and not unworthily tearmed Divine, since the heighth of Poetical rapture hath ever been accounted little less then Divine Inspiration."

Other opinions, however, advanced in the Preface bear more conspicuously the peculiar stamp of Milton's mind. Philips favors, though not dogmatically, the revival of the chorus and the observance of the unities in modern tragedy. He expresses, too, a dislike for rhyme that his age did not share. "If the Style be elegant and suitable," he wrote, "the Verse, whatever it is, may be better dispenc't with; and the truth is the use of Measure alone without any Rime at all would give far more ample Scope and liberty both to Style and fancy than can possibly be observed in Rime, as evidently appears from an English Heroic poem which came forth not many years ago." This allusion, however, to *Para-*

dise Lost may simply indicate that Philips's opinions were derived from a reverent reading of his uncle's work rather than from a recollection of his spoken words.

Such a deduction would leave opportunity in the Preface for the inclusion of thoughts distinctly characteristic of the later day. In one place, Philips supports an argument with an analogy drawn from "history-painting," which the age of Shaftesbury was greatly concerned with, and which Milton, as far as one knows, cared nothing for. One suspects, also, that Philips had never heard his uncle allude to the "Rustie, obsolete words" of Spenser and his "rough-hewn clowterly Verses," or make so much of Shakespeare's "unfiled expressions, his rambling and indigested Fancys, the laughter of the critical." All this is the current opinion of the London coffee-houses, not of the blind scholar's quiet home in Artillery Walk.

The Preface, therefore, in our judgment shows no clear evidence of Milton's personal guidance, though it may reveal, here and there, the influence on its author of Milton's published works. Equally indecisive are the estimates that the compiler gives, in the body of his work, of individual writers. Cowley is praised as "the most applauded Poet of our nation both of the present and past Ages." Spenser's *Faery Queene* is "for great Invention and Poetic heighth judg'd little inferiour, if not equal to the chief of the ancient Greeks and Latins or Modern Italians." Edmund Waller, Milton's supposed benefactor, is mentioned for "the charming sweetness of his Lyric Odes or amorous Sonnets long since wedded to the no less charming Notes of H. Laws, at that time the Prince of Musical Composers." The poem by Erycius Puteanus that introduces Comus is not mentioned with other of his works. Francis Quarles is dismissed as "the darling of our Plebeian Judgments." Chaucer is called "the Prince and Coryphoeus, generally so reputed, till this Age, of our English Poets." To this item Philips adds that the story of Cambuscan "is said to be compleat in Arundel-house Library." William Drummond, whose works Philips had edited, wrote, he says, "to my thinking, in a style sufficiently smooth and delightful; and therefore why so utterly disregarded, and layd aside at present, I leave to the more curious palats in Poetry." William Shakespeare, "the Glory of the English Stage," "pleaseth with a certain wild and native Elegance; and in all his Writings hath an unvulgar style." Ben-

jamin Johnson (sic) lacked Shakespeare's genius, but "his own proper Industry and Addiction to Books advanct him to this perfection." Marlowe is termed "a kind of second Shakespeare, not only because of his plays, especially *Dr. Faustus*, but because of "his begun poem of *Hero and Leander*." Finally, to cite only one more of the interesting items from this compilation, certain English authoresses, among them Mrs. Behn, are noticed in an appendix.

No reader of Milton can glance over the pages of *Theatrum Poetarum* without having his attention arrested more than once by such judgments as these. The words on Shakespeare and Jonson carry their reminders of *L'Allegro*. No one of the criticisms, though, is more in accord with Milton's prejudices than that of John Cleveland, whose "Conceits were out of the common road, and Wittily far fetch't." Those who for that quality esteem him the best of English poets may hold their opinion, Philips half cynically remarks, "provided it be made no Article of Faith." Apparently, he retained some of his uncle's prejudice against

Those new-fangled toys, and trimming slight
Which takes our late fantastics with delight.

But who can say that Philips's judgment here or elsewhere was determined by what Milton had told him? Would Milton, for example, have included these women in the Hall of Fame? Much, indeed, in Philips's work belongs, we suspect, exclusively to him and his age. Frequently, we admit, Philips shows real taste in his judgments, and stands sometimes at variance with the ruling fashion of his time. Nevertheless, he should be allowed that much originality, and what he says that is sound should be credited to him. It may seem, then, that Thomas Warton spoke without warrant when he said: "There is good reason to suppose that Milton threw many additions and corrections into the *Theatrum Poetarum*."

ELBERT N. S. THOMPSON.

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